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## Trump's honorary degrees: A new academic battleground

by SUSAN ADAMS

On January 12, the day after President Trump reportedly referred to Haiti and some African nations as “shithole countries,” members of the faculty at Lehigh University felt they had to act. “That statement cut us short,” recalls geophysics professor Anne Meltzer. “How can the president of the United States say that about a whole set of people?”

Back in 1988, Lehigh's senior class had voted to host then-businessman Donald Trump as commencement speaker and award him an honorary degree. A research university of 7,000 students in Bethlehem, PA, Lehigh has given honorary degrees to more than 100 people, including Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, Harvard philosophy professor Cornell West and poet Maya Angelou. Its board of trustees, which makes such calls, has only revoked one. In 2015, it stripped Bill Cosby of his degree, explaining in a statement that Cosby “admitted under oath to behavior that is antithetical to the values of Lehigh University and inconsistent with the character and high standards that honorary degree recipients are expected to exemplify.”

Now 30 years after Trump was honored, Meltzer says, she and her colleagues felt that like Cosby, Trump had run afoul of the university's stated values, laid out in a document called “The Principles of our Equitable Community.” Among the 10 principles: “We confront and reject discrimination in all its forms.” The faculty was also motivated by two petitions circulated by students, staff and alumni. Last fall, graduate Kelly McCoy had collected more than 31,000 signatures on a Change.org petition that implored the trustees to rescind Trump's degree.

After the board declined to act on the petitions, Lehigh faculty members put together a motion pressing the trustees to revoke Trump's degree, asserting that multiple Trump statements “do not meet Lehigh's standards for respectful discourse.” The motion laid out 26 offending statements, including the president's contention that there were “very fine people” among the white supremacists who demonstrated in Charlottesville, VA last August, and his advice about women: “You have to treat 'em like shit.”

In February 357 of Lehigh's 472 faculty members voted on the motion, with 83% in favor. But early this month the trustees rejected the motion in a short statement saying the board was committed to “openness to and respect for the broad views and perspectives of our many University constituencies.” (Three board members contacted for this story declined to comment.)

The Trump controversy is not over at Lehigh. Religious studies professor Michael Raposa says the faculty has requested a meeting with the board: “We have the right to be in a room with the trustees and ask why they don't see what we see.”

“This isn't about politics or about freedom of speech, which we completely support,” says Meltzer. “It's about the president's statements and how they marginalize or intimidate whole groups of people.”

Faculty members at Wagner College feel similarly. In 2004 Wagner, a liberal arts school with 2,000 students in Staten Island, gave Trump an honorary degree. Last February, 33 Wagner professors signed and published an open letter to U.S. Rep. Dan Donovan in the Staten Island Advance, condemning Trump's performance as president. More than 700 Wagner alumni signed

a letter to the school's board of trustees, asking them to strip Trump of his degree, and a Change.org petition made the same request. Wagner has yet to respond publicly and director of media relations Lee Manchester didn't respond to emails and calls requesting comment.

Trump's reputation remains golden among the leadership at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA, the largest Christian university in the world with 110,000 students. Run by Jerry Falwell, Jr., a Trump supporter who reportedly turned down the president's offer to serve as Secretary of Education, Liberty has awarded Trump two honorary degrees, a doctorate in business in 2012 and a doctorate of laws in May, when Trump delivered the school's commencement address.

But even at Liberty, Trump invites controversy. A student group, Liberty United Against Trump, posted a letter after the Access Hollywood tape exposed Trump's claim that he could do anything to attractive women, including "grab them by the pussy."

"Donald Trump does not represent our values and we want nothing to do with him," says the letter. "He has made his name by maligning others and bragging about his sins.

That sentiment was shared by Robert Gordon University, a public school with 17,000 students in Aberdeen, Scotland, near a Trump golf resort. The school had given Trump an honorary doctorate of business administration in 2010, but after Trump called for a Muslim ban in 2015, Robert Gordon pulled the degree. "Mr. Trump has made a number of statements that are wholly incompatible with the ethos and values of the university," the school said in a statement.

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